

WSWS reporters visit refugee camps in the war-ravaged north of Sri Lanka

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The following report was prepared by a World Socialist Web Site reporting team in Sri Lanka, which visited some of the southern areas of the country's war-torn Northern Province where tens of thousands of refugees are housed after fleeing intense fighting. In recent weeks, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have inflicted serious defeats on the Sri Lankan army—the latest chapter in a brutal 16-year war that has claimed at least 55,000 lives and left many more maimed, homeless and poverty stricken. The LTTE is fighting for a separate state for the Northern and Eastern provinces where the majority of people are Tamils.

The Sri Lankan government and the army through their media mouthpieces have tried to portray the situation in the north following the LTTE offensive as “normal”. At the same time, President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who is facing an increasingly uphill battle for re-election, is desperate to prevent the real picture from emerging and has restricted the activities of journalists in and around the war zones.

We found the conditions in the southernmost border areas of Northern province, including the strategically important town Vavuniya, anything but normal. People are very tense, as they fear that a fresh offensive may erupt at any moment. The situation can only be described as chaotic with thousands of refugees living in makeshift camps and dependent on meagre rations.

Last month around 60,000 people fled from Vavuniya and thousands more from other border areas following the collapse of Sri Lankan army camps in the Wanni area. When we visited Padaviya, a remote peasant area situated about 300 kilometres from Colombo, there were nine refugee camps crammed with 1,800 families or more than 7,000 people. Refugees had trekked 15 kilometres from villages in Welioya peasant settlement. At the Padaviya Mahasen College refugee camp alone there were 1,678 people, including 203 babies, 182 younger children and 354 school-age boys and girls between five and 10 years of age.

The last 40 kilometres before Padaviya, we had to travel through a war-ravaged area. The military has set up a number of tough checkpoints. Passengers have to get down from their vehicles and soldiers go through the bags and baggage. The whole exercise takes about half an hour each time. Fifty to 60 soldiers man the checkpoint, which is surrounded by green oil barrels and sandbags. Getting closer to Padaviya we see abandoned, damaged houses and paddy fields covered with grass and bushes that tell us there has been no human habitation for years. We saw an army battalion relaxing on the roadside—they were being transported back to the war zone.

“As the LTTE started the offensive in the Wanni, the army fled the area. The police followed them. So we also had to flee from the area,”

refugees at Mahasen Collage told us. Previously when the LTTE attacked a village, people fled to a nearby village. But this time the situation was different. The population of the entire Welioya settlement had to flee, they said. The refugees had only a few clothes. Schools in the Padaviya area had to be closed to accommodate them.

We arrived at about 4pm—and the refugees were only then eating their midday meals! One youth came up to us and showed us his plate. There was one piece of dried fish and a bit of lentil curry with rice. “This is what we are receiving every day,” he said. Each family had been supplied with a mat to sleep and a mosquito coil. They prepared meals themselves with food items supplied by various charity organisations. A few spoonfuls of powdered milk were distributed each day to families to feed infants.

Almost all of the youths in the refugee camp were members of the home guard force. The home guards are recruited, particularly from village youth, as an auxiliary force to help the police and army “protect villages” from the LTTE. They are usually given a few sessions of weapon training and sent to guard the villages with shotguns.

While speaking to us, the area police chief called the youths over. He wanted us to help the police build bunkers, they said. “This is a difficult job. The police find fault with us all the time and harass us. If we do not follow orders they throw us out of the job. We don't like this job and the war.”

Many of the youths join the home guard force because they have no other job opportunities in the rural areas. They have been forced to end their education due to the war and poverty. They receive a monthly salary of around 4,000 rupees (\$US57). We were told that in Welioya alone were about 700 home guards.

The policy of the army and the government has been to settle Sinhalese peasants in areas of the north and east as part of their military strategy against the LTTE and the Tamil minority. They have been used as pawns in the war.

An older peasant, T. B. Ukkubanda, told us a little of the history: “Settling us in the Welioya area is a question in itself. From 1984 onwards, Sinhalese were increasingly sent to this area. This colony was set up at a point where Mulaitivu, Vavuniya and Anuradhapura districts connect to each other and on the border of the North and East provinces. This step itself has become a cause for a conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. The creation of this settlement was done as a step towards separating the Northern province from Eastern province. Welioya has become a place of war. We have become refugees of this war.”

J. P. Gamini, a home guard from Nikawewa, joined in: “I have 40 years experience. I have come to know a lot about the past. There

were Tamils in these villages in those days and there was no racial dispute. We lived together assisting each other. The problems came after 1984. Even in the early days armed youths did not harm us. Some Sinhalese in the area were provoked and set against them. We don't want this war. We have suffered enough. No one here likes the war but there are a few who want this war. We tell those who come to see us that we don't need relief aid but relief from the war."

A part-time teacher and peasant from the same village, N. M. Peter added: "Both the UNP [United National Party] and the Peoples' Alliance governments aggravated the war. They were unable to settle it. Even though we are getting old, we can't leave the same fate for our children."

All the war victims from Welioya are peasant families. The settlement was part of the Mahaveli irrigation project but the area has been completely neglected. Each family was given only one acre for cultivation—only a third of the land received by families in other Mahaveli areas. Earlier, 16 villages had been set up in Welioya but people have abandoned seven villages due to the war.

"We are not in a position to carry on cultivation. We are here because we have no other place to go. Only agro-chemical dealers and middle men buying paddy rice come to see us," the farmers told us with sarcasm. Farmers only receive a meagre income for their crops. The recruitment of youth into the home guard force has led to shortages of manpower for cultivation.

"Education is in a pathetic situation," Ukkubanda said. "How can students pay attention to their studies in a war situation, with the pressure of war psychology. In a few weeks time the government examination begins for GCE (O/L) [General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level)]. Now students are affected by the war and the closure of schools." Six schools in the Welioya area closed when students were forced to flee the area and nine schools in Padaviya were closed to accommodate the refugees.

Most children are only able to complete eighth or ninth grades. A very few students are able to go on to higher grades. Welioya schools do not have science laboratories, libraries or other facilities. Some students have to walk three kilometres to attend school. People told us of one school in which there were around 450 students and only 11 teachers, including the principal.

Before arriving at Padaviya, we passed through Anuradhapura, the capital of the North Central Province, situated 200 kilometres from Colombo. It has become a major military base for directing war operations in the north. A few days before hundreds of relatives had flocked to Anuradhapura to try to find their sons among the many wounded soldiers in the city.

We spoke to a few wounded soldiers from Nedunkerni and Oddusudan army camps and they all had similar stories. Some soldiers told us that they would not go back to the war zone again. Others were trying to put on a brave front but there were signs of disgust in their faces.

An officer from Nedunkerni camp said: "The LTTE started to attack Oddusudan camp on November 1. First they attacked the navy. A lot of them died. Then they have attacked the army camp from the front and the rear. Everyone was taken by surprise. The soldiers were unable to do anything. No order had been received as to what to do... The soldiers retreated without a fight. The next day our camp was attacked. There were 400 soldiers in my unit. We retreated while fighting. In the end only 12 of our unit survived."

A soldier from the Oddusudan camp told us about the LTTE tactics and then angrily reproached the officers in charge: "The officers asked

us to attack and vanished from the scene." He said that all the Tamils had fled the area when the army captured the strategic rural town two years back. The army had built bunkers and other fortifications using materials from the abandoned houses in the area. But it had not halted the attack.

On our way from Anuradhapura to Padaviya, we had to travel for some distance along the Colombo-Vavuniya highway. The LTTE had ordered Tamils out of Vavuniya in preparation for an attack but we saw none on the road. Those with passes to the south had gone by railway, as travel through the checkpoints is easier. The majority had fled to the west of Vavuniya.

According to one report, 40,000 people had fled from Vavuniya to the Rasendrakulam School for shelter. But the school building was too small, as it usually accommodates only 150 students. Most of the refugees were out in the open, exposed to rain. There was only one toilet and conditions were terrible.

One refugee told reporters: "From KKS [Kankasanthurai—a northern town in the Jaffna Peninsula] we shifted to Urumpirai in 1990. Then in December 1995, following the capturing of Jaffna [by the government forces], we moved to the Wannai mainland. Then in January 1999 we came to a government-controlled area to improve our lifestyle. Now we have had to move out from there as well."

A few days later the LTTE called on people to return to Vavuniya. But not all returned. The returnees are also uncertain how long they can stay. Traders have not brought back all the goods they shifted out during the crisis. Now and again people hear the sound of the artillery duels between the government forces and the LTTE.

A retired government servant, who fled to Colombo with his four children, described the panic that broke out when the LTTE ordered people to leave Vavuniya: "In order to save their lives, thousands of people moved out of the town and the suburbs, taking whatever they could carry. Only in few places did anyone stay, at great risk, to look after the things they could not move.

"Refugees were the worst affected. They had no place to go," he said. "Earlier they were provided with scanty meals prepared by contractors. When they protested about the substandard food, they were given dry rations. Again they protested, as the dry rations were not adequate. The authorities allowed the refugees to leave the camps to earn a living but only within the town limits. Now they cannot find any work. Neither the International Red Cross nor any other humanitarian organisation is there to help them."

In the Wannai area, there are 350,000 people without food supplies from the south for over five weeks. They have been trapped, firstly by the military operations of the Sri Lankan army in October, then by the LTTE offensive. It was only last week that the government forces and the LTTE agreed to allow supply lorries into the area. These limited supplies will not be sufficient to feed the large number of civilians now starving.



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